

Sympathetic Joy: Cultivating Muditā and the Brahmavihāras

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Dharma Talks · 21:29

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed, Noble and Fully Self-Awakened One.

Some of you who read my tip—I don't know if many people read the stuff—some of you did read it. You'll know the basic content, but I thought I would speak to that particular tip that I did on joy, sympathetic joy.

I just don't remember any instructions by my teachers to develop joy or compassion for that matter, or even equanimity. None of the Burmese Sayadaws taught me that at all. It was always about *metta*. Now, of course, there's a certain reason for that maybe, because once we've established *metta* it's obviously easier for us to respond to other people's suffering and their joy and to be equanimous within ourselves even though we are surrounded by suffering and the joy doesn't move out into excitement or indulgence.

So the *metta* really is the base. Once that's established, we can presume the other illimitables will arise. So what we mean by illimitable is, of course, that these qualities can be developed indefinitely. It's just up to us. You can go up to the highest absorption, if you wish, with them.

And it's also known as the *Brahmavihāra*. So just to remind you, Brahmā was the chief god of the Vedic system. And so what he's saying is that this is the most beautiful heart state that we can experience—it's one of the most beautiful. Actually, you can develop any virtue illimitably. It's just that these are the four, what we can call them, social virtues.

And it's important for us to balance, you know, the compassion. Especially now when we can see that the world is sort of beginning to crash. We can have terrible forebodings of what's going to happen economically, politically, et cetera, et cetera. So somehow you have to be careful if you are listening to the news. I know some people just don't listen to the news anymore. It's just too depressing, too upsetting. But if you are, you have to sort of balance it a bit with joy and happiness.

Sometimes on retreat, which I'm going to lead a retreat soon, I'll often say, at the end of the day, we do a meditation on joy. And I say, bring to mind moments of the day when you felt joyful. And one or two people tell me afterwards that they can't remember any. So the reason for that, of course, is that we're not paying attention to it. That's understandable because unless you're feeling ecstatic joy or big joy, you don't notice the little moments when you feel content, fairly content when you feel fairly happy, nothing particularly exciting. In fact, we don't want excitement.

And so not paying attention to it means that we're not clicking on. And when we do start paying attention to these moments of joy, then they grow because of that attention. So remember, an act of attention is an act of intention. It's an empowering act. Your awareness, notice, your attention notices what's happening. And when it's a full attention, it becomes a full, it fills up your whole consciousness. And in that way, it grows.

So we have to train ourselves in periods where we're feeling sort of downcast to pay attention when any bit of joy comes up. Ah, there's a bit of joy. Fancy that. And of course, we have to make the distinction between joy and excitement. So excitement is that bit of indulgence where we become attached to a certain joy, which is understandable, but it unfortunately causes consequences, which is an obvious one is grief at loss. The fear of loss, the anxiety of loss.

But joy is very cool. It doesn't have that. It's the difference on your Christmas cake between marzipan and icing. See, the icing's too much. You should always take it off. It's very bad for you, right? But the marzipan's fantastic, even though it's only got a bit of sugar. Well, compared to icing, see? So that's your distinction.

So joy is quiet. It's pleasant. At times, very pleasant mental state, even to the point of absorption. It's always accompanied with calmness. This is the point. Always calm. There's always a sense of equanimity there. It doesn't demand that you keep it going. When it goes, it just goes. And that's fine. And it's always appropriate to the joyful situation you're in.

We can feel joy for ourselves when we've succeeded something. So that's fine. There's nothing wrong with that. And when we're with somebody who is joyful, we respond with that joy. And it's appropriate. It's sort of to the situation. You've only got to think of parents when they rejoice in their children's successes. It's very natural to do so.

And one of the reasons that we're not really aware of the little joys that pass through us during the day, the little happinesses, the little contentments, is that, of course, we're much more aware of the horrible things that might happen, perceived dangers. I suppose it's all got to do with our evolution. That's what they say anyway. But the fact is that unless we pay attention to these little joys, they won't grow. Simple as that. They won't grow.

I like to quote the mystical romantic poet William Blake on this. He always has a lovely verse. He who binds himself to a joy, I'm sure you know it: "He who binds himself to a joy does the winged life destroy. But he who kisses a joy as it flies lives in eternity's sunrise." So eternity here can be understood as the ever present moment. It's not a matter of time as such.

It also has the positive effect of undermining envy and jealousy. I personally always thought of envy as something that, when you want what somebody else has. Sometimes it can even be a compliment if you actually don't want it. So if you say, well, I envy your new car, and there's no desire for that car in you,

that's fine. That's one way we use it. But envy normally is wanting what the other person has. And jealousy, wanting what they have and also hating them for having what they have. So there's a bit of hatred in there. But it's also, I think, it involves—it comes sometimes a loss of fear of losing what you have to a rival. I mean, in a relationship that can happen. So jealousy comes up.

So as it says in the actual discourses, there's a lovely line. Envy is abandoned by one who develops sympathetic joy. So that's something to really work on if we find ourselves being envious and jealous. And it has the effect then therefore of lessening any resentment or selfishness. It undermines that sort of rivalry, especially at work, where you have colleagues or work people whom you see are doing better than you et cetera. It can get pretty nasty.

I had an occasion with that myself actually. I was offered a promotion and the funny thing was that it wasn't really a promotion to do with my department that I was in. So I was in the general education department in an FE college. And what had happened was after the great and honorable Mrs. Thatcher brought in her new rules, there was a huge amount of unemployment in Birmingham. It rose from—I remember this—it rose from six to 16% in six months. And I had the idea that as an FE college with all our trainings, we could get some of them in. So I started this program for them.

Now, of course, the people who wanted the promotion were the engineers, were the electricians. They didn't expect me teaching sociology or something. At the time, I was teaching English to immigrants. So there was this sort of real rivalry there. It was quite horrible. And one man took great deception to me. Anyway, I left and became a monk. So they were all right in the end.

For those of you, of course, oh, yeah, there's an important point here, which is about the body and mind. So in Buddhism, the body and mind are two different energies. They're not the same. And when you die, it's the mental body that rises out of the physical body. And what the body does is it's like a sounding board. It resonates the heart. It resonates against the body. And you may actually have the experience when you are in an emotion, when you're actually absorbed into an emotion and you're feeling it and you're seeing what its characteristics are. You may just have the experience where they actually separate and you can see that the body makes everything worse. And actually, whatever you're suffering from, say the depression, it's the body that feels the heaviness. It's the body that makes it really quite difficult to bear. So there is that combination.

So that means, and according to what I've read, I don't understand the chemistry or anything at all, but basically our cells have receptors for various types of hormones. And if you've got depressive hormones constantly coming into the body, those receptors grow at the expense of those receptors that receive the chemicals that make you happy. So, you know, it's like dopamine, endorphins, all those things that make you happy. The receptors are less.

Now, the thing is, I'm not so sure you'd be particularly aware of that. Because you would just, how can I say, when you feel depressed, you'd feel heavily depressed. But when you feel joy, you wouldn't know that

actually you could feel more joyful if you hadn't developed depression so much. I know this is a very contorted way of talking about this, but I'm trying to get across that there's actually a physical reason for practicing joy.

And, you know, in whatever way you can raise it—walking in nature, in a park or whatever, meeting friends, anything that lifts the heart—has a direct effect upon the body. I mean, we know that because bad mental states can actually make you physically ill. But it's good to remind ourselves of that.

Okay. So there's lots of reasons there for developing joy. And we may as well end this talk with the actual practice. So if we just sit quietly for a moment, and then we'll just repeat these phrases and go through the process that we do when we practice it with *metta*.

So make sure that you're sitting comfortably. It doesn't have to be as if you're sitting in *vipassanā*. Make sure you're comfortable. That's the important thing. And then just drawing ourselves inwardly and just recognizing the mental state we're in. And just resting with that for a moment.

And then in the same way that we do with *metta*, bring somebody to mind who raises joy when you see them. It can even be a comedian, somebody who brings a sense of joy into the heart. And it's good to have a smile on the face. It's good to have a smile. It doesn't have to be a great big Richter smile. But a smile does release all the endorphins or whatever. And just to feel that on your face, a sort of a gentle smile.

And you're bringing somebody to mind who makes you joyful when you see them. And the blessings are: May you be joyful. May you be ever more joyful. And if you wish, may you enjoy the sublime happiness of Nibbāna.

So may you be joyful. May you be ever more joyful. May you experience the sublime happiness of Nibbāna. So we can bring somebody who's helped us in our lives offer them the blessings of joy.

And that all those who are near and dear to us. Friends, people at work, whomever we wish.

Choosing a neutral person, someone we see but don't know.

Turning that joy towards ourselves.

We can even bring someone to mind that we're having difficulties with. Not big difficulties, but difficult.

Radiating outwardly to each other. May we, our present spiritual companion, and to our neighbors and neighborhood, to all the people in our country, to all the peoples of Europe, to all people on earth.

And finally, to all beings in all directions.

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